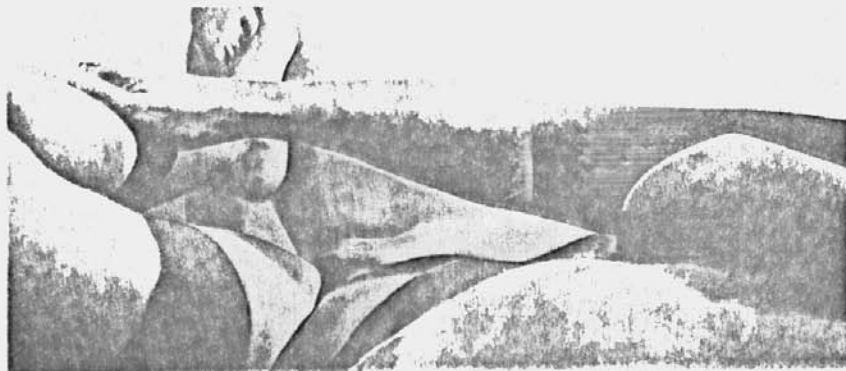


## JOAN SEMMEL

Joan Semmel's headless figure paintings immediately bring to mind Philip Pearlstein's work. However, the final results in these faceless nudes by Semmel and Pearlstein are almost diametrically opposed. Pearlstein's figures, which all seem to have a characteristic worn-out appearance, are painted with a clinical detachment. The absence of a face in Pearlstein's figures merely reinforces the highly objective and unemotional quality conveyed by the figures.

Semmel's enlarged close-up views of a female torso also share a sense of objectivity but on the whole the paintings are warmer and more intimate. Without facial expressions, Semmel's figures become humanly abstracted, retaining evidence of bulges, freckles and body hair. The sense of intimacy in Semmel's painting is derived from her carefully framed view of the mid-section of the female figure as well as from the presence of warm colors in the skin tones.

The use of space in Semmel's and Pearlstein's paintings suggests another important difference in their concepts. Pearlstein's figures maintain a conventional balance between figure and background, but Semmel's figures are so enlarged that the traditional notion of a background almost completely disappears. Although a probable analogy for these enlarged vistas of the figure would be to a landscape, the topography of the flesh is not convincingly translated into metaphors for hills or valleys. In the very large foreground thigh of *Renoir Revisited*, for example, the leg becomes merely a flat shape lacking a sense of volume. The absence of solidity in many of Semmel's forms, however, make these works comparable to the diaphanous images found in close-up



Joan Semmel, *Triangular Funnels*, oil on canvas, 1976. Collection Chris Connal. Courtesy Lerner-Heller Gallery. Photo: Bevan Davies.

shots from film.

Although Semmel's work is not as technically refined as Pearlstein's, her approach to the figure outweighs the inconsistencies in her painting.

The flaws are secondary to the pervasive warmth and palpable quality of the flesh. (Lerner-Heller, New York, March 5-31)

—Holly O'Grady

Holly O'Grady is a painter and critic who taught art criticism at the University of Wisconsin—Green Bay.